

# CELEBRATING TENNESSEE WILLIAMS



Playwright and author Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi on March 26, 1911. After college, he moved to New Orleans, where he wrote many short stories, poems and plays in the city that he often called his "muse." Although he moved constantly throughout his career, living in places such as New York, Key West, Rome, Barcelona, and London, it was the Crescent City that played the biggest role in both his personal life and his writing career. Williams once stated that he always considered New Orleans his "spiritual home," and that "my happiest years were there."

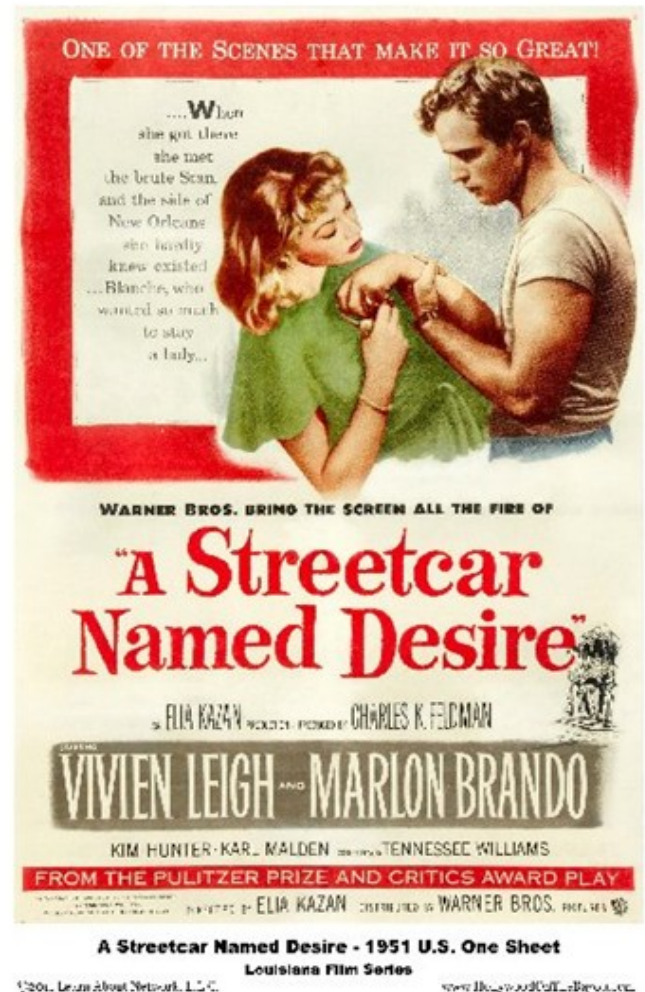
Williams' strict southern upbringing coupled with his spiritual awakening while living in New Orleans are evident in many of his writings. These influences are clearly evident in the following films which were set in, and in some cases partially filmed in, New Orleans.

### ***A Streetcar Named Desire* - 1951**

Williams wrote the film's screenplay which was adapted from his successful play of the same name. The movie, directed by Elia Kazan and set in New Orleans, tells the story of Blanche DuBois, a woman whose life takes a downward turn when the family estate dwindles away.

The film opens with Blanche traveling on a streetcar named Desire, from the railroad station in New Orleans to her sister's apartment. When Blanche arrives she finds her sister Stella pregnant and married to Stanley Kowalski. They live in the old French Quarter. Having lost her husband, parents, teaching position, and old family home in Laurel, Mississippi, Blanche has nowhere to else to go.

The film starred Vivien Leigh, Marlon Brando, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden.



Art director Richard Day, five-time Academy Award winner, was sent from California to New Orleans before the film went into production. According to an article appearing in the *Times Picayune* on October 28, 1951, Day combined picturesque aspects of various streets and buildings of the Vieux Carre and designed a striking set for the Elysian Fields apartments in which the action of the drama takes place. But, according to the article, it quickly became apparent that the motion picture company would have to do some of its key shooting in New Orleans rather than on a studio sound stage.

The City of New Orleans extended extreme courtesies to Leigh, Kazan and the film crew. Mayor Morrison and the New Orleans Public Service officials even recalled one of the retired streetcars named "Desire" and put it back into service to be used during the filming of scenes for the picture at the L&N Station at the foot of Canal Street. (Below photo shows Vivien Leigh, Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan on the set)



***A Streetcar Named Desire*** won Academy Awards in the following categories: Best Supporting Actor (Karl Malden), Best Actress (Vivien Leigh), Best Supporting Actress (Kim Hunter), and Best Art Direction (black & white). The film was also nominated for the following Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Direction, Best Actor (Marlon Brando), Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, Best Music (scoring dramatic or comedy picture), Best Sound Recording (Warner Bros. Studio Sound Dept., Nathan Levinson, sound director), and Best Writing (Screenplay). The film was ranked 47th on AFI's 2007 100 Years.



Another Tennessee Williams movie partially filmed and set in New Orleans was ***This Property is Condemned***.

### ***This Property is Condemned* - 1966**

Adapted from the 1946 one-act play of the same name by Tennessee Williams, the screenplay for this film was written by Francis Ford Coppola, Fred Coe and Edith Sommer. The film brought child actress Natalie Wood, future superstar, Robert Redford, and sophomore director Sidney Pollack to Louisiana and Mississippi for location shooting. Also on board were Charles Bronson, Kate Reid and Mary Badham.



***This Property is Condemned*** follows 13-year-old Willie Starr. Willie, dressed in the remnants of a once lovely dress, sits on abandoned railroad tracks and wistfully tells her friend Tom about her dead sister, Alva. Alva Starr is a beautiful woman living in a small town in Mississippi in the 1930's. Her mother, Hazel, the proprietor of a boardinghouse for railroad workers, insists upon steering her into the arms of a prosperous middle-aged man, Johnson, but Alva falls in love with Owen Legate, a handsome stranger from New Orleans who is in town to lay off a number of railroad workers as a result of the Depression.

When Owen is beaten up by five of the workers, he makes plans to leave, taking Alva with him. Hazel tricks him into thinking that Alva is engaged to Johnson, however, and Owen disappears without

giving Alva a chance to explain.

Upon learning the truth, Alva gets drunk and spitefully marries her mother's brutish lover, J. J. Nichols. The next day she runs away and joins Owen in New Orleans. Their happiness is soon ruined by Hazel, who

viciously exposes her daughter's marriage. In despair Alva runs away, becomes a cheap pickup, and eventually dies of tuberculosis. With the passing of time, Willie only recalls Alva as an enchanted creature whose life was filled with beauty and romance.

Scenes for ***This Property is Condemned*** were shot in New Orleans, including the French Quarter and Lake Pontchartrain. The on-set photo below features Pollack, Redford and Wood (with Bronson in the background). Other filming was done around the old Louisville and Nashville Railroad depot in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.



Tennessee Williams' original one-act play included only two characters—Willie and the boy who listens to her story. Reportedly, Williams hated the film and tried to have his name removed from any promotion or publicity.



While the final version may be far removed from Williams' one-act play, it follows his pattern of the Southern/New Orleans setting, a brutal male character, and tawdry sexual relations.

Another recurring theme to some of Williams' works dealt with mental illness. His first successful play, *The Glass Menagerie*, featured a character modeled after his older sister Rose who spent most of her life in mental institutions following a prefrontal lobotomy authorized by her mother. Williams' opposition to this type of procedure is the basis for his next film set in New Orleans.

### ***Suddenly Last Summer* - 1966**

The film is based on a one-act play by Tennessee Williams that was originally paired with *Something Unspoken* as part of the 1958 off-Broadway double-bill, *Garden District*. It was adapted for the screen by Gore Vidal although Williams also received credit. The film was directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and starred Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn and Montgomery Clift.

Catherine Holly is a young New Orleans debutante who is hospitalized in a mental facility after her cousin Sebastian dies under questionable circumstances while they were on summer holiday in Europe. The late Sebastian's wealthy mother, Violet Venable, makes every effort to suppress the potentially sordid truth about her son and his death. She bribes the state hospital's administrator by offering to finance a new wing for the underfunded facility if he will coerce his brilliant young surgeon, Dr. John Cukrowicz into performing a lobotomy on her niece.



*Suddenly Last Summer* - 1959 Belgian Poster  
Classic Film Series

Tennessee Williams: *Suddenly Last Summer*

As the young doctor tries to get to the bottom of what happened to Catherine, Violet's demeanor and devotion to Sebastian present a formidable barrier. Catherine herself doesn't offer much help since her recollections are jumbled by medication and the trauma of Sebastian's demise. Under pressure to seal the deal and cut into Catherine's brain, Cukrowicz's principles (and attraction to the young woman) prevent him from proceeding until he uncovers what actually happened to Sebastian. When Catherine is administered truth serum, she recalls the truth about how Sebastian used her to "procure" young hungry men and how this practice led to his death. The revelation about her son's true sexuality is too much for Violet, however, who loses her mind.



Mankiewicz and Taylor on set.

Although set in New Orleans, ***Suddenly Last Summer*** was shot on location in the village of Bagur in Catalonia, Spain.

Williams would later deny that he had any part in the making of the film. He also thought Elizabeth Taylor was miscast as Catherine, telling *Life* magazine in 1961, "It stretched my credulity to believe such a 'hip' doll as our Liz wouldn't know at once in the film that she was 'being used for something evil."

The film was a box office success and garnered Academy Award for Best Actress nominations for Elizabeth Taylor and Katherine Hepburn. The film was also nominated for Best Art Direction for Oliver Messel, William Kellner, and Scott Slimon. Taylor and Hepburn were nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Actress – Motion Picture Drama and the Laurel Award for Top Female Dramatic Performance, with Taylor winning both awards.

Williams also set several of his writings in his home state of Mississippi, some of which were later made into movies. These include: ***Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***, ***Fugitive Kind*** and ***Summer and Smoke***. The ***Sweet Bird of Youth*** continued the southern thread by taking place in Florida.